DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 865 CS 208 829

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TITLE The Caribbean Bildungsroman: Notes on a Culture.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (74th, Detroit, MI, November 16-21, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; *Childrens Literature; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Images; Elementary Secondary Education; Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; Literature Appreciation; *Multicultural Education; *Novels; *World Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Caribbean Literature (English)

ABSTRACT

The universality of the childhood experience is a perspective that is useful in the classroom where the student body reflects the multiethnic, multicultural roots of American culture. The novels from the Caribbean can add new material to the body of world literature and should be included in a crosscultural study of the "bildungsroman" (novels of childhood). One such novel is "Crick Crack Monkey" written by Merle Hodge. As opposed to other Caribbean novelists whose nostalgia for childhood takes on an extra dimension when they are displaced from the birthplace they love, Hodge presents the first full portrait of a young girl growing up in the Caribbean. Narrating in the first person, Cynthia Davis, nicknamed Tee, gives the reader a female perspective on life in the Caribbean, focusing on the two different worlds represented by her two aunts. This humorous novel chronicles the education and acculturation of a young girl, thus filling the gap caused by the dearth of developed female characters, in general, in Caribbean literature. (HOD)

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The Caribbean Bildungsroman: Notes On A Culture

Jacqueline Brice Finch

Those of you who enjoyed such bildungsromans or novels of childhood as David Copperfield, Huckleberry Finn, Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, Catcher in the Rye or Invisible Man should be aware that within the canon of Caribbean literature, which emerged as a world literature during the twentieth century, are additional bildungsromans to be read, enjoyed and studied. By the 1950's, having firmly established the milieu for their prose fiction, the Caribbean writers were ready to devote whole novels to a celebration of childhood. While Louis James has heralded the movement as "a sad initiation," the Caribbean bildungsroman fits well into the canon established in the nineteenth century by English and American writers.[1] However, unlike his European and American counterparts, the Caribbean novelist's nostalgia for his childhood takes on an extra dimension when we note that he is often displaced from the birthplace he loves in order to successfully pursue his writing career. As Michael Gilkes remarks in The West Indian Novel,

> Living abroad, the exiled writer almost inevitably returns to a childhood scenario in order to rediscover a "lost domain." For it is the world of childhood that retains the freshest images of the most deeply imprinted experience of a native landscape of sensibility. The need to

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> look back, to reaccess one's childhood from the vantage point of maturity, is related to the writer's wish to establish an authentic basis of experience.[1]

With his A Brighter Sun (1952), Samuel Sevon of Trinidad launched the first full-scale treatment of the growing up process in the Caribbean. Between 1953 and 1969, eight other Caribbean novels were written: In the Castle of My Skin, Black Midas, Christopher, Guiana Boy, Amongst Thistles and Thorns, The Year in San Fernando, Song for Mumu, and The Humming-Bird Tree.

In the 1970's, it is not surprising to find re-echoes of other novels of childhood. Merle Hodge breaks new ground in her first novel, Crick Crack Monkey (1970), when she introduces the first female protagonist of the Caribbean bildungsroman some eighteen years after A Brighter Sun's publication. Cynthia Davis, nicknamed Tee, is our first full portrait of a young black girl growing up in the Caribbean, and this novel begins to fill the gap caused by the dearth of developed female characters, in general, in Caribbean literature.

Narrating in the first person, Tee gives us from the start a female perspective on life in the Caribbean, focusing initially on her two aunts. Unlike the women of George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin (1953), the

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central women in Crick Crack Monkey--Rosa Davis (Tantie) and Beatrice McNeil (Auntie Beatrice)--are given strength but in opposition to each other. When Tee's father, Selwyn Davis, goes abroad after his wife dies in childbirth, Tantie, his sister, takes Tee and her brother Toddan to live with her in a working class neighborhood in Santa Clara, Trinidad. Tantie is a fun-loving, earthy woman who is frank and vocal about her perceptions of life. "When Tantie was thwarted the neighbours for six houses on every side ... were generally aware of this fact."[3] She makes sure that her niece and nephew get along with everyone in the community and participate fully in its activities, such as kite-flying, steel band music, and Carnival.

The central conflict of the novel begins when the children's maternal aunt, Beatrice, tries to wrest custody of the children from Tantie in order to give them the benefit of her middle-class home. Even before the children's mother had died, the two aunts were decrying each other's élan vital. At the wake Auntie Beatrice tells Tantie, "Look at you, you aren't fit!" (p. 9), but Auntie Beatrice has her faults too. True, Beatrice can provide the material comforts for the children which Tantie lacks: a nice home in the city, a car, domestic help, private school education and a vacation beach cottage in Canapo.

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In further contrast to Tantie, Auntie Beatrice is properly married. Yet her colorless husband, Norman McNeil, is hardly preferable as a role-model to Tantie's boyfriends, whom the children call Uncle Herman and Uncle Sylvester.

Meanwhile, Auntie Beatrice has earned the epithet with which Tantie has labeled her. "The Bitch" is appropriate for a woman who makes everyone around her miserable. Auntie Beatrice's husband is hen-pecked. Her own daughters are all miserable because they have inherited their mother's social-climbing habits. Her neighbors are ignored because they lack class, her servants chastised for even acknowledging these neighbors. While Auntie Beatrice creates a sterile and lonely environment for herself and her family, Tantie is ever expanding her generous nature until it radiates throughout her community--which in turn stands ready to assist her. Thus, we find communal strength extolled by Merle Hodge, and convincingly. After Auntie Beatrice takes Tee and Toddan for a car ride without asking Tantie's permission, the neighborhood is mobilized to prevent a possible kidnapping. Tee recounts the plan of action:

> We had clear instructions what to do if The Bitch turned up while neither Tantie nor Mikey [her ward] was there--we were to run over to Neighb' Ramlaal-Wife and stay there; and if Neighb' Ramlaal-Wife wasn't there we were tc go to Neighb' Doris; or to Tan' Mavis, or down to

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> Marva-Mother. Half the street was involved in the barricade against The Bitch. (p. 20)

Beatrice has neither friends nor family to abet her plans (it goes without saying).

Still, as Tee matures, Hodge reveals that she needs both of the worlds that her aunts represent, "that of the imported metropolitan culture, imitated by Aunt Beatrice; and that of the indigenous black creole culture, reflected in Tantie's way of life."[4] Tee learns cultural values by living a simple life with Tantie and visiting her grandmother, Ma, in Pointe d'Espoir during the summer. For Tee, Ma's land is reminiscent of the terrain in the African tales Tee keeps hearing recounted there. Tee views the land as

> an enchanted country dipping into valley after valley, hills thickly covered with every conceivable kind of foliage, cool green darknesses, sudden little streams that must surely have been squabbling past in the days when Brar Anancy [Spider Man] and Brar Leopard and all the others roamed the earth outsmarting each other. (p. 26)

There in the fertile countryside with Ma, Tee enjoys eating off the land, gathering fruit and making native dishes. When she is with Tantie, Tee enjoys the raucous manner in which Tantie and her cohorts conduct themselves. These are real people who know themselves and have a strong sense of

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identity.

In contrast, Auntie Beatrice is a "crick crack monkey," a person who is trying to reject her background or to emulate someone whose background is radically different from her own. And the point of the critical remarks a moment ago--that Tee needs this interfering aunt--is that one must have contrasts by means of which to make choices. Tantie murmurs to herself at her sister-in-law's wake, "Monkey can't see 'e own tail" (p. 9), to note that Auntie Beatrice refuses to identify with her kinfolk, black people. Beatrice experiences the same ridicule that Manhatt'n, a child in Tantie's neighborhood, experiences when he prolongs his imitation of American Western drawl and "someone maliciously murmured, 'Crick-crack!'" (p. 15).

Yet, Beatrice has the ambition, the social graces and the contacts Tee may need to succeed when she leaves the island at the novel's end to join her father in England. Under Aunt Beatrice's care, Tee learns to be a young lady, perfecting her grooming and manners for an urban environment. Unfortunately, she also learns how to feel inferior and how to act snobbish. The combination of these latter, negative characteristics will cause Tee to feel ashamed of her behavior, for example, while in Santa Clara with Tantie.

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Thus, the twenty-four chapters of this humorous novel are a chronicle of the education and acculturation of the girl child. Unlike the authors of the earlier Caribbean bildungsromans, Hodge does not merely mention that the protagonist attends school, or merely use the school scene to lambast the educational system of the Caribbean. She allows her star pupil, instead, to relate the myriad impressions she obtains in the classroom. No serious trauma is related to Tee's school life. Once Tantie succeeds in registering her in Mrs. Hinds' school at age five, Tee records her progress from learning to write and sing nursery rhymes to studying for scholarship examinations and singing English songs, every step being described in detail.

More than in the earlier novels, the texture of this one exists for its own sake. For example, Hodge captures the touching self-importance of the six-year-old who has been promoted to the First Standard when Tee recalls,

> We the seasoned elders at Mrs. Hinds' were beginning to discuss, for the benefit of the Little Ones, the proud prospect of going over to Big-school. In casual tones we considered the fact that over there you know, you sit at things called "desks," not all around a table as if you were going to eat, and over there you read hard books, with plenty words and nearly no pictures, and you think you sing baby nursery-rhymes over there? Oh no over there you learn poetries...(p. 58).

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By the Third Standard, Tee has discovered the world of books:

> Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went a-sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names, never saying "washicong" for plimsoll or "crapaud" when they meant a frog. Books transported you always into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found Abroad. (p. 89)

Although the story is narrated in the past tense, Hodge's skillful use of language, an interplay of the sophisticated and the vernacular, conveys a sense of immediacy to the action. Earlier we had seen "in enchanted country" pop up near "Brar Leopard"; here "seasoned elders" vies with "poetries." Also the comparison of English and West Indian scenes and words in the second quotation foreshadows the alienation of the expatriate West Indian.

When Tee is in elementary school, she begins to note the social dynamics of the classroom. She sees the rivalry between the private and parochial school children and learns about expulsion when a classmate is dismissed for misbehavior. When she takes her first trip to the headmaster's office after raiding an orchard and cursing the owner when he discovers her there, no caning is in

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store for Tee. Rather, she receives a lesson in the value of contacts and nostalgia. The headmaster, Mr. Thomas, becomes so enthralled with the memory of teaching Tee's Tantie and his own schoolboy escapades that he sends Tee back to class without even a reprimand. Strategically, Tee also masters an ordinary delinquent's behavior, knowing when the teacher "was in favour of blankness on [a student's] face--a good inane cow-expression" (p. 87) or when to bawl, "a tearless, toneless and prolonged ship's horn blast" (p. 88) as a sham cry, to please the teacher who'd have her cry when he smacks her hand.

By age eight, Tee's school decorum is beginning to conflict with her home life, so she creates an imaginary person, Helen, who can fulfill temporarily all the demands the two environments create. About Helen Tee explains, "She was the Proper Me. And me, I was her shadow, hovering about in incompleteness" (p. 90). When Tantie notices her niece trying to behave differently around the house--by wearing socks and shoes other than to school, for example, when the girl had formerly gone barefoot--Tantie immediately attributes Tee's behavior to artificial airs and chastises her severely:

> "Look, Madam, when yu start to wash yu own clothes then yu could start to play the monkey--you ever put-on socks to go down in the shop? What it is take yu at-all?" (p. 90)

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This scene foreshadows the last meeting between the two when Tantie's chastisement of Tee's growing snobbishness takes a different form. A key event has occurred: the grandmother, Ma, has died (and meanwhile Tee has not been notified--she is living with her Aunt Beatrice prior to taking off for England). Tantie does not address her niece directly, preferring to relate her own last conversation with the dying grandmother. What Tantie told the poor woman--she now reveals--was that Tee had no time to visit her on her death bed. About this indirect tongue-lashing, Tee says that "every word was a ton of bricks on my head" (p. 158). The moral force of her aunt's reminder will be indelible.

Though no "ton of bricks" has had such an impact before this, Tee's acculturation does accelerate once she has left the simple village of Santa Clara to live with her social-climbing relatives and to attend St. Ann's, the city high school. At St. Ann's Tee is expected to care about her clothes and her status in her classroom. Favoritism based on color and class now obtrude, confusing Tee who had thought that intelligence and aptitude were the only criteria for rewards from the teacher. When her cousin Carol, ranked well down in the class, and other light-skinned students are selected for the school's

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extra-curricular activities as well as team sports, Tee rationalizes that they must have been chosen because they had attended St. Ann's Lower School. However, she finally realizes that her teacher, Mrs. Wattman, is prejudiced when this woman tells Tee, whose class rank was never below third, "You are one of those who will never get very far" (p. 142). It is ironic that Tee's subsequent preparation to join her father in England, literally getting her "very far" indeed, is what propels her into Mrs. Wattman's, as well as her cousins', good graces.

Chapter twenty-one is the crux of Crick Crack Monkey. All of the pressures of city living, school and life with the McNeil family converge on Tee to the point where she thinks,

> I wanted to shrink, to disappear. Sometimes I thought I would gladly live under the back steps with Dash [the dog], rather than cross their paths all day long. I felt that the very sight of me was an affront to common decency. I wished that my body could shrivel up and fall away, that I could step out new and acceptable. (p.140)

The desire to be other than herself, her Helen or Proper Me, is still Tee's fantasy, however childish. She daydreams about journeying back to Santa Clara or running away to her grandmother in Pointe d'Espoir, describing in detail her welcome until inexplicably "the picture

stubbornly snuffed itself out" (p. 156). But these powerful, yet sophisticated, words indicate resources that will bear up in the future: they have the frankness that is, perhaps, a heritage from her Aunt Tantie.

If she cannot even imagine herself fitting back into the village, Tee's last trip to Santa Clara, on the evening before her flight to England, confirms her apprehension, for her reunion with Tantie brings her no solace. Though Ma had died the week before, Tantie has failed to notify Tee of the tragedy until her arrival. Feeling severed from an important link to her childhood on learning of her grandmother's death, Tee is further traumatized by the illumination that she does not feel comfortable in Santa Clara, the only other symbol of her childhood identity. She says, "Everything was changing, unrecognizable, pushing me out. This was as it should be, since I had moved and no longer had any place here" (pp. 158-9). By the evening's close, Tee's alienation from her roots is complete as she says (and these are the closing wors of the novel), "I desired with all my heart that it were next morning and a plane were lifting me off the ground" (p. 160).

Unlike G-, the protagonist of Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin, or Alan Holmes, the protagonist of Ian McDonald's The Humming-Bird Tree (1969), who leave their islands for

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educational pursuits, Tee has an unknown future. We can only assume that she will continue her education under her father's care and move in one of several directions. She can remain abroad, return to a cultivated Trinidad environment, or perhaps become like Bita Plant of Claude McKay's Banana Bottom who manages to reintegrate herself into a village after her sojourn in England by rejecting the middle class influences in her upbringing. What we have a right to hope, given her reactions to the forceful influence of Tantie, is that she does not become a woman with a "parrot mentality" like Auntie Beatrice's.[5]

The universality of the childhood experience is a perspective that is useful in the classroom where the student body reflects the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural roots of our American culture. The novels from the Caribbean add new material to the body of world literature and should be included in a cross-cultural study of the bildungsroman. Given the large number of West Indians living in the United States, especially in major metropolitan areas, these novels will be of particular interest to West Indian students tracing their roots and to others curious about the culture of their neighbors in the Caribbean.

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Notes

1. Louis James, "The Sad Initiation of Lamming's 'G' and Other Caribbean Tales," Common Wealth, ed. Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: University of Aarhus, 1972), p. 143.

2. Michael Gilkes, The West Indian Novel (Boston: Twayne, 1981), p. 116.

3. Merle Hodge, Crick Crack Monkey (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 12. Subsequent pagination in text.

4. Marjorie Thorpe, "The Problem of Cultural Identification in Crick Crack Monkey," Savacou, 13 (Gemini 1977), 32. Miss Thorpe approaches this novel in a radically different way than I do.

5. B. Marie Perinbam, "The Parrot and the Phoenix: Frantz Fanon's View of the West Indian and Algerian Woman," Savacou, 13 (Gemini 1977), 8.